



Harrington - A Stranger Things Story by ThatOneWookiee

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Summary: 'King' Steve Harrington's parents are out of town for the weekend, and that can only mean one thing; he HAS to use his family's riches to his disposal and throw the best party Hawkins has ever seen. But what will happen when Steve's grandmother, one fateful VHS rental, and a girl by the name of Nancy Wheeler challenge everything Steve has ever believed about himself? (A prequel)

Harrington - A Stranger Things Story

1

"Harrington. Late again."

All eyes were glued to Steve. That was how he liked it.

With a stupid grin on his face, he nodded.

"Sorry, Ms. Wiet. I'll try harder next time."

Ms. Wiet rolled her eyes, scribbled Steve's name down on the attendance sheet, and wasted no more time before resuming her intense lecture on punctuation.

It wasn't long before Steve realized the spotlight had shifted and was no longer on himself. This led his focus elsewhere. Back in the day, the *old* Steve would have actually paid mind to the words of Ms. Wiet; as his father had so constantly reminded him, he wouldn't be working for the family company if he didn't honor it.

He could care less about his father's stupid company.

Nancy Wheeler took notice of the fact that Steve Harrington's entrance had been an obvious attempt at winning everyone's attention and that disgusted her. If he truly were to try harder next time and if he truly were sorry, he wouldn't arrive that way to every class, every time. Upon realizing that she was thinking about him and that she was giving him exactly what he wanted (undying attention), Nancy sighed and began to take notes yet again.

But those darn eyes.

She gave him a sideways glance, daring him to stop looking. There it was again; that smile. She hated to admit it, but he was kind of cute.

The cute boys are always jerks, aren't they?

She shook it off, returning her attention to where it belonged.

Steve cringed, giving in and listening in to the lecture as well.

Academics are cute, he told himself.

"You know," he whispered to her, his eyes still on the chalkboard, "It's not nice to stare."

Nancy pursed her lips, a remark fighting to escape. Instead, she cleared her throat and responded with a simple, "Then stop."

An instant rock formed in Steve's throat and somehow his admiration for Nancy Wheeler sky-rocketed.

Silence loomed at the Harrington household, only interrupted by the quiet chewing of lasagna. Steve didn't like the silence - it made him uncomfortable - but he wasn't particularly interested in striking up a conversation with his parents either. In fact, he wasn't sure they remembered of his existence.

Just to make sure they were, in fact, his parents and that he was, in fact, their son, he made the difficult decision to speak up.

"How was your day, mom?"

"Fine."

Sarah Harrington was busy flipping through a fashion magazine that appeared to be more interesting to her than the life of her son. Trying not to get his hopes up, Steve tried his luck with his dad.

"How about you?"

"Meh."

Even worse. He should've known.

When Jason Harrington wasn't staring holes into the wall and wishing his only child out of existence, he was either making money or spending it, which had eventually lead them to their current residence.

As the realtor had insisted only months earlier, as far as Hawkins

went, this house was the best of the best. And so Jason had jumped at the chance to purchase it, outbidding the other interested buyer by half a million dollars.

Steve didn't see why House Number Five had to be in a meaningless town in the middle of meaningless Indiana, but he shook it off. Living in a small town meant it was an easy town to impress.

And it was. Only months into his career at Hawkins High, he had earned the title of "King Steve." Despite his family's fortune, school truly was the only place he felt like royalty. At home he wasn't sure he even felt like a peasant.

Dang, Nancy's really getting into your head with these analogies, doofus.

Somehow, it always managed to work itself back to Nancy Wheeler, and that fact surprised Steve every time. He knew almost every girl at Hawkins would pay good money for a date with him, but somehow it was only Nancy that he cared about.

Problem was, she was of the rare breed that *wasn't* interested in him. She simply knew she could do better. Heck, *Steve* knew she could do better.

"Your father and I are leaving town tomorrow," Sarah said, shaking Steve back to reality.

He scoffed. "That's a new one."

"The two of us work very hard for these vacations, Steven," Jason mumbled, his voice clouded by the remnants of his lasagna.

Steve rolled his eyes, questioning his father's definition of work. He kept these thoughts to himself.

"It's just...you're never home."

"Your grandmother's going to stay with you..."

Jason paused, watching as his son glared at him. "Keep you from causing any trouble."

"You know me, dad. I'm not like that."

Neither of those things are true, Steve thought.

"It won't hurt you any. And two weeks is too long for a boy your age to be alone."

Steve had to work hard to keep from spitting out his water.

"Two weeks?!"

"You'll live without our attention, Steven."

Suddenly, the secrecy of Steve's opinions no longer seemed necessary.

"I've made it this far," he dared to whisper.

They'd heard it. Despite their continued eating and ignorance, they'd heard him loud and clear. He knew they had. But they'd never once cared or much less responded to his concerns. The best he'd ever gotten was a stern, "It's our decision. You're a child. One day you will make your own decisions. But not today."

Not today, Steve thought. *Not today*.

2

Steve wasn't very fond of the looks he was getting from Tommy and Carol when he walked through the glass doors at the front of Hawkins High School. He decided to return the favor, acting as a mirror and giving them the same look of shock and confusion.

"What'd I do this time?" he asked, nodding and winking to a swooning girl nearby.

"Nothin' yet," Tommy managed, his face unwavering, "And that's the problem."

Steve gave a weak laugh. "I don't follow."

"We heard the news," Carol whispered, "About your parents leavin' for a couple weeks. And everybody's just dying for the date."

"How the heck did you -"

"Ah ah ah," Tommy stuck his dirty finger to Steve's lips. "Questions later. What's the date? We've got a whole line'a people waitin' for the answer."

"It's the, uh, tenth I think but...line?" Steve scratched his forehead, possibilities swirling in his mind. "Whaddaya mean 'line'?"

"When's the party, stupid?" Carol said, this time much louder.

Only now did Steve notice all the eyes on him. He was used to attention but *this* was something different. Everybody cared. Everybody wondered. Everybody expected a...

"Party?" Steve mumbled. "I don't remember ever promising a..."

"Oh come on," Tommy moaned. "Us Hawkins kids've never had an opportunity like this. Rich kid's parents gone for two weeks; it's too easy, Harrington. You've got to have a party."

It was peer pressure to the utmost extreme.

Struggling to find the words to say, Steve's eyes fell on Nancy Wheeler. He saw in her eyes a look of warning...of what, he didn't know. Of what would happen if he *didn't* have a party? Of what would happen if he *did*?

Steve didn't know what Nancy wanted...maybe he shouldn't care. These people - these wackos that considered him king because of his family's fortune - these were his people. And he knew very well what they wanted.

"To heck with it. Tuesday!"

He yelled so everyone (even the poor teachers) could hear.

"The party's Tuesday!"

The hallway erupted in whoops and cheers. Yet again, King Steve had delivered.

As he received pat after pat on the back and hug after hug, Steve decided and confirmed what he had known all along; he truly didn't need or want his parent's attention at all. If he had the approval of his kingdom, what else could he need?

3

Ever since the booming announcement of "the party at King Steve Harrington's house," there was an additional feeling of excitement and anxiety in the air. Steve didn't know if he'd ever felt so important as he walked into the cafeteria; for once, the poor quality of the Hawkins High school lunches was not the prime topic of discussion.

On his way towards Tommy and Carol's table, Steve caught the sight of Nancy. She was staring at him (ironically enough) and the look on her face told him he'd done something wrong. If only because of his current reputation, Steve made a sudden decision to take a detour and to sit himself in the seat across from her.

"It's not nice to -"

"Oh shut up."

The two shared a laugh. Steve couldn't stop smiling.

A silence began to creep into existence and Steve noticed he'd been smiling for perhaps too long. His eyes stayed glued to Nancy, who was now looking elsewhere, trying hard not to fall for him.

"A party, huh?" she said finally, looking back to him.

"Uh, yeah," Steve admitted, confused and unsure. "You coming?"

Nancy laughed as if he had just said the most outlandish thing in the world.

"I'm not really a party person."

Steve nodded matter-of-factly.

"And, even if I was," Nancy continued, taking a bite of her food, "I'd never in a million years go to your party."

Steve was hardly surprised. *She just is that way, huh? Hard to get.*

"Who'd I have to be to get you to come to my party?"

Despite the minor attack at his reputation, Steve's smiling remained. He figured it always would in Nancy's presence.

She gave it a moment of thought.

"Tom Cruise."

She looked confused when Steve burst into laughter.

"What? He's cute," she said, arching a brow.

"Okay, whatever. Tom Cruise. Okay. I could pull off Tom Cruise."

"Oh could you?"

"Without a doubt."

"Prove it then."

"I don't need to prove it."

"I'd like something to go off of," Nancy said through laughter, "I just simply don't see it."

"Okay, fine."

"Fine."

For a brief moment, he just sat there as if, at any point in time, he would erupt into a perfect Tom Cruise impression. Instead, he just nodded confidently.

"I'm better than Tom Cruise."

Now Nancy was nearly in tears from laughing. "That's even more of a lie."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Party at Cruise's house, Tuesday."

He started to stand up, giving her a wink. "You're invited."

"Okay," she said weakly, more than aware of the cheesy smile on her face.

Steve was so busy taking in every detail of her face that he didn't notice the girl standing behind him. Barbara Holland gave him a dirty look, sitting down where Steve had been sitting.

"Oh, sorry, Barb, I didn't..."

"Barbara," she corrected, straightening her glasses.

"Sorry, I...so, Nancy, are you..."

She was ignoring him, already deep in conversation with Barb. Steve shrugged it off, skipping over to his normal table and taking a seat right beside Tommy and Carol.

"Flirting with the bookworm, are you?" Tommy chuckled.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Nancy's not like that."

Tommy and Carol were giving him a look that they only reserved for when he spoke nonsense.

"Okay, maybe she's like that, but...she's pretty cute, you've gotta admit."

Carol shrugged. "A king like you could do much better."

Steve cringed. Carol didn't know what she was talking about.

"Maybe I don't want better."

They gave him the look again, shortly returning to their lunches and previous topic of discussion. Despite what they implied, he wasn't sure if they really did care about and support him. He knew they didn't.

Does anyone?

Steve tried not to think about it too hard. With one last glance at

Nancy Wheeler, he forgot all about the day's abnormalities, jumping into Tommy and Carol's conversation and trying hard to not look back.

The look the innocent boy gave him almost made Steve regret what he had already done.

"I'll never do it again!" the boy cried, tears streaming down his face.

Steve lowered his bloodied fists, careful not to look at them.

"You better not. You know what happens if you do."

"I do!" he squealed. "I really do!"

The onlookers chuckled.

The onlookers left.

The boy struggled for breath, struggled to stand up.

Steve's job was done.

He left.

4

"No alcohol, no sex, and no parties."

Steve nodded, his hands in his pockets. He leaned in to hug his parents, but they were already halfway out the door.

"Your grandmother will arrive shortly."

Jason Harrington slammed the door behind him, leaving his mansion with an odd echo of something long forgotten. Steve suddenly felt cold.

"No 'I love you,'" he mumbled, "Not even a goodbye."

He stood there for a moment, trying to figure out what to make of it. He'd been home alone countless times. And like he, himself, had said, he would survive without his parents' attention as he always did.

But something was off. His parents were extra simplistic this time.

Extra jerky, Steve thought.

He hadn't seen his father's mother, Zoe Harrington, for several years (House Number Two, he reckoned). At that time, she had been married to her second husband, Daniel, but from what little Steve knew, Daniel had somehow exited the picture. Which left Zoe alone. As Jason had once said, "She's got about as many friends as she has brains."

"One?" replied a young version of Steve.

No response, even so long ago.

Steve blinked, realizing he'd been standing and thinking for a good couple of minutes and that continuing to do so would lead him to potential thoughts he didn't want to think about.

And so he made for the kitchen, grabbed himself a Coke, and turned on the TV.

He had to laugh when he saw the beaming face of Tom Cruise on the small screen.

"Speak of the devil," Steve laughed. "Come to remind me of how much better you are than me? Of how much more Nancy likes you? Yeah, yeah. I know I'm alone, buddy, no need to tell me."

Steve arched a brow at his own words.

Did I really just say that?

Alone.

I really am alone, aren't I?

Out of habit, he forced himself out of a serious thinking session. But the thought somehow remained, tugging on his leg and begging for attention. After all, he'd have to face it eventually. It'd be his turn to make a decision someday.

"You're just a kid. You'll make your own decisions someday. But not today."

Not today, Steve thought, taking note of how much it actually hurt this time. *Not today*.

Steve hadn't mentally prepared himself for the knock on the front door. In fact, he was so caught up in the bright, flashing images on the TV that he hardly remembered he was expecting company. His heart sunk a little when he remembered who, exactly, said company was.

"Just a second!" he called, reaching for the TV remote and turning it off.

He opened the door to find his grandmother, Zoe Harrington, a stout woman by all accounts, standing there and smiling at him. It was a half smile, inauthentic but wishing it could be more.

"Hello, Steve."

Steve gave her a half smile right back. "Hi. It's been too long."

"And it has," she muttered, handing him her purse.

"Oh...do you need help with..."

She waved him off. "I'm quite alright. If you could just take my purse, I'll take care of the rest. Not all old women are elderly, young man."

This time her smile was wide and real.

"I believe it," Steve said sheepishly, shutting the door behind her.

She'd only been there for a matter of seconds and he was already worn out.

He waited a minute before opening the door again. When he did, he was greeted by her same smiling face...although he had to work hard to see it beneath the near dozen bags.

"Oh," he said, surprised, helping her in the door. "I really could've

helped."

Zoe sighed, her bags falling beside her in a rushed pile.

"Certainly not. I had a point to prove."

Steve nodded, biting his lip when she didn't say anything else. In an attempt to kill the awkward silence, he motioned for the living room.

"You can have a seat if you'd like."

She chuckled. "Oh please...I'm really fine, darling. How old do you think I am?!"

Steve laughed nervously. He couldn't tell whether or not she was joking.

"Only kidding, dearie. I'd love a seat. And a drink too, would you?"

After fully comprehending the blur of an introduction, Steve nodded and made a dead sprint for the kitchen.

"Is water fine?"

"Do you have any soda pop?" Zoe called, taking a seat in front of the TV.

"Of course. We have Coke *and* Pepsi products."

"Which ones?"

"All of them...that's what I meant."

Zoe rolled her eyes and whispered to herself. "Dear lord, Jason."

"What was that?"

"Water would be fine, love."

Steve sighed, quietly so that she didn't hear him.

When he returned, he found her staring holes into the family's massive collection of artifacts that surrounded the living room.

"It's a beautiful place, isn't it?"

Zoe shrugged, accepting her drink.

"Just a maybe?" Steve asked, sitting down across from her.

"It's a bit much."

Steve nodded. "Yeah, I get that."

"More than a bit, actually."

"Yeah, I know."

"Coke *and* Pepsi products, huh?"

Steve took another sip of his Coke . "Yep."

"Most people have one or the other or...I don't know, is it so crazy to think that maybe some people don't have but one? Or maybe they don't have soda at all. Or a house even."

Steve shook his head. "No, that's not crazy. It's true."

"I know it is."

She was no longer focused on the artifacts; instead, Zoe Harrington was glaring at her grandson. For reasons he couldn't name, guilt began to flood Steve.

"Well, um...I've got some homework I really need to get done."

He didn't. But this conversation was going downhill by the millisecond. Steve figured it was best he back out while he could.

"Oh, please, Stevie..."

Steve cringed at the nickname.

"It's only my first night here. We should rent a movie."

"I dunno, I really...."

"It's more of an order than a request."

Steve chuckled. "Well, um...there's a VHS rental place a mile or so outside of Hawkins if you'd like me to drive us out there. Or you could stay here, of course. What's ours is yours."

It sounded like something his father would say but Steve knew better than that.

"If you wouldn't mind travelling alone..."

Steve laughed nervously (a recurring theme, he noticed). It was all so awkward. She was so kind and caring - definitely a step up from what he was used to - but there was some sort of unnamable grudge she held against him.

"I'll see what they've got."

Zoe nodded, smiling again.

"That'd be wonderful."

The silence resumed. This time, Steve noticed it quicker.

"I'll be back."

"You better."

She winked...playfully, Steve hoped.

He nodded for the hundredth time and left.

5

The *VHS Express* parking lot was empty save for one painfully recognizable Mercury Grand Marquis; the Wheeler family car. Steve couldn't help but let out a little exasperated sigh when he laid eyes on it, parking several spaces over just in case. He hoped that maybe the Wheelers were simply eating Chinese food at the neighboring *Yum Yum To Go* but he doubted his luck.

For a brief moment, he considered waiting for them to leave before

realizing the potential consequences. He decided to suck it up, locking his BMW and accepting whatever was to come.

I'll be in and out, he told himself. Stealthy. Like a ninja.

Steve pushed the door open, triggering the bell tied to the top of it. The only three heads in the store turned his direction.

Crap.

The man behind the counter gave him a massive smile, waving at him.

"Welcome to VHS Express! Good day for a movie, isn't it?"

Steve let out a quiet laugh, barely even paying the man any attention, staring at the inevitable: Nancy Wheeler and what appeared to be her younger brother. The two made eye contact and Nancy simply gave a weak smile, immediately returning to her business. Steve felt both cheated and relieved.

Without thinking, he walked towards the "New Arrivals" section. He'd been so caught up in Nancy's presence that he hadn't even taken the time to consider what movie he'd bring home, let alone what Zoe would like.

"Excuse me," he called out to the man behind the counter.

He was quick to respond, rushing over to Steve's side in a surprisingly quick manner.

"How may I be of service?"

"I was wondering if you had any suggestions," Steve breathed, his eyes somehow on Nancy yet again.

The man chuckled. "Well, you've come to the right guy."

Steve supposed that was the man's way of saying "You're in for it" but he shook it off anyway, nodding as if his attention wasn't strictly on Nancy at the given moment. The man just kept on blabbering about each title, finally landing on a beat up copy of *"The Empire Strikes*

Back" and handing it to Steve. Out of instinct, he took it.

"We're already sold out of *Jedi* but I can put your name down for later if you'd be interested. It's a long line already."

"No...no thanks, this'll do."

The man smiled. "Alright, I'll go ahead and ring that up for you."

Steve nodded, smiling and making eye contact for once. "Thanks."

While he let go of the VHS tape that he didn't even know the name of, Steve walked over to Nancy, waving at her almost guiltily.

"Funny seeing you here," he said, regretting his word choice instantly.

"Yeah," she chuckled, her eyes falling to the boy beside her. "Oh, um...Steve, this is Michael. Michael, this is Steve. We're good...friends."

The word 'friends' made Steve cringe. He didn't know what he'd been hoping for, but certainly not that.

"Mike," the boy corrected, gritting his teeth at Nancy before turning to Steve and accepting a handshake. Steve smiled at him.

"It's nice to meet you, Mike."

"Yeah," Mike said half heartedly, sorting through several NES cartridges.

Nancy laughed nervously, starting to blush. "He's a man of many words."

"I see that," Steve grinned. "So, what brings you here?"

Nancy bit her lip. "Mike did. Although it's really the other way around."

She gave Mike a look that Steve guessed was supposed to inflict guilt. It didn't appear to work, judging by the look she received back.

"You owed me in the first place, stupid," Mike moaned, "And mom

said the car was for all of us, remember? Just because you have your license doesn't make it your car."

Steve wanted to laugh but decided against it, remembering whose side he was supposed to be on. He just gave Nancy a stupid grin. She sighed.

"Little brothers, huh?"

They shared a laugh, which Mike didn't seem to appreciate. He stomped away to go somewhere else - away from Nancy.

"What about you?" she asked, trying not to care about Mike's whereabouts.

"What?"

"What brings you here?"

"Oh, uh...my..."

The realization dawned on him so fast that he barely had time to keep it from slipping out. So long as Zoe Harrington was visiting, so long as she did the job she intended, there would be no parties at the Harrington household.

"Family movie night," Steve lied, maybe too quickly. He nodded to add believability.

"Oh cool. My family could never agree on one movie," Nancy laughed.

"We share a similar taste. Really closely knit."

"That's great."

"It is."

Silence, as always.

"Sir! Sir, you're all checked out."

Steve looked from the man behind the counter to Nancy and smirked.

"Well, I guess I'll see you around. Maybe outside of school sometime?"

It was worth a shot.

Nancy struggled for words. "I...I'm not sure what you're implying."

She looked like she really cared but Steve doubted it.

"If you're asking me on a date I really just..."

Steve looked to the ground, defeated. "No, I get it. Bye."

It was in this moment that Steve realized what he truly loved about Nancy Wheeler and what set her apart from any other girl at Hawkins. Everyone seemed to love him. She didn't. Steve found that oddly attractive.

He bit his lip and sprinted to the counter, leaving Nancy behind to question everything.

"How much?" Steve asked, accepting the VHS he'd apparently agreed on.

"Five dollars even. You get a dollar back upon return."

Steve handed him the cash.

"You've done this before, huh?"

"Pardon?"

Steve blinked a couple of times. "The routine and everything. You know all the right things to say. You've got it down, is all I mean."

"Oh. Yes."

The man - Bob, judging by his nametag - gave the widest grin yet.

"Best in the business."

Steve smiled back, giving him and Nancy one last glance.

"I appreciate it. Keep the change," he said, leaving the store somehow

renewed.

Once situated in the car, Steve looked down at the VHS tape in his lap.

"The Empire Strikes Back?" he whispered to himself, sighing.

He shook his head. At the very least, maybe he'd make Zoe happy.

6

Zoe Harrington squealed with excitement when she saw the VHS that Steve cradled.

Thank God, he thought.

"Oh, wonderful!" she cooed, clapping her hands together. "I'm always up for some Harrison Ford! He's a real stud, you know."

Steve laughed as if it wasn't the most awkward thing he'd heard in a long while.

"So what took you so long?"

Steve was halfway through sliding the tape into the player and had already erased the possibility of things going wrong.

She had to ask.

"I mean, it's pretty far outta town."

"That's a bad excuse."

"What could I possibly be hiding?" Steve said, pointing to himself. "I'm practically an angel. I make no mistakes. The girls love me."

Zoe made a noise that sounded like choking but appeared to be a form of mockery.

"That's what all the rich kids think..."

She paused, her tone suddenly more serious.

"Until they go through me."

Steve couldn't help but swallow his spit. "Well, uh...okay, better the get the movie started, it's getting pretty late."

He didn't realize how fast he was talking until after the fact. He turned the TV on and sat as far as physically possible away from his grandmother, praying she didn't go any further. He had to admit, it hurt.

For once, he almost wished she'd just ignore him.

"So it *was* a girl."

"I never said that."

The bright yellow letters that read "Star Wars" flashed on to the screen, a triumphant horn scaring Steve so much that he jumped and yelped. Zoe laughed.

"Maybe you're right...a boy with a scream like that isn't going to get the girls."

Steve took a deep breath, straightening his ruffled shirt out.

"I wasn't kidding. I'm practically a celebrity at school."

Zoe remained silent, the wickedest of grins plastered to her face.

"I'm sure you are."

The movie continued without another exchange of words. Upon the sight of Harrison Ford's character, Han Solo, Zoe let out a massive belly giggle.

"Han's a brilliant character. His arc is phenomenal. Such a wonderful life lesson that so many need to hear."

Steve nodded, pretending to understand the words that just came out of her mouth.

"I used to write stories, you know. Studied them my whole life. I

know good character when I see it, and Han Solo has it all. He's reckless - thinks everyone loves him. He lets his fortune get to him. He lies and cheats and tries to put on this brooding mask but, deep down, he's the good guy."

Steve swallowed his spit. It seemed oddly...targeted at him. He just nodded, turning his attention to the screen.

"You're imagining things," Leia said, smiling.

"Am I? Then why are you following me? Afraid I was going to leaving without giving you a goodbye kiss?"

"See what I mean? Leia's great too. She plays hard to get. Knows she's too good for him. It's almost hilarious."

Nancy, Steve thought. It was all so similar, it was eerie.

The more he thought about it, the more it scared him.

Thinks everyone loves him - - but don't they?

Lets his fortune get to him - - it's hardly the source of my popularity, is it?

Lies and cheats - - I don't that often.

Puts on this brooding mask but, deep down, he's the good guy...

Steve's heart sunk.

"You don't have to pretend."

She was looking him dead in the eye, as if waiting for a response.

It is targeted at me, Steve thought.

"I...I don't know what you mean."

A lonesome tear rolled down his cheek.

"To understand all my storytelling lingo. It's nonsense, I know."

She laughed, her hand suddenly on his shoulder.

"I appreciate the effort nonetheless."

Zoe Harrington returned to her movie but Steve struggled to follow suit, his mind twisting and turning in every direction, daring him to question everything he'd ever believed about himself.

7

"The party's off."

Tommy and Carol almost fainted.

"What the heck?!" Tommy gasped, throwing his arms up in dismay. "What's gotten into you? You do know everyone will hate you after this."

Steve sighed. "Yeah, I know. It's just...my grandma's watching me and..."

He didn't even get the chance to finish his sentence before the entirety of the hallway burst into laughter. Carol was laughing so hard she had to keep herself from falling over.

"Didja hear that, everyone?" she screamed, already knowing the answer. "Harrington's not havin a party because he's too busy being babysitted."

"Oh shut up."

"You really want us to?" Tommy said, taking slow steps towards Steve.

"Then don't cancel the party."

"I can make my own decisions."

It felt good saying that. Really good.

Tommy laughed, right in his face now. "You know...you don't always have to be king around here. A stunt like you're about to pull could cost the crown."

Steve gritted his teeth. It was true.

"I could care less about a stupid crown," he whispered.

"We both know it's about more than that."

And it was.

Steve's mind jumped to his parents. To the ignorance. Not throwing a party - not giving in to his kingdom and their needs - would be giving away the best part of his life.

He had money. He had a mansion. He had a car.

But his most valuable possession was his reputation.

And it was too late to change what he'd done with it.

He smiled.

"Come on, Tommy. The king never breaks his promises."

Steve cupped his hands together and put them to his mouth.

"IT WAS ALL A JOKE! The party's still Tuesday and, this just in..."

You could almost hear everyone's breathing pause in anticipation.

"Everyone is invited!"

Chaos ensued...happy chaos, all at the hands of King Steve.

"Ah, man," Tommy said, his hand on Steve's shoulder. "You really got us there."

Steve winked. "Might as well have a little fun."

Carol smirked. "I knew it all along. Never doubted you."

Steve nodded confidently. "Oh I'm sure."

He wasn't. They really would turn on him in an instant. He was certain of that now. And if that meant anything, it meant he'd have to

be extra careful from now on. He couldn't slip like that again. Every decision mattered. He was, for once, in control of himself.

It was hard to be king. But, in the end, it was all worth it if it meant the difference between outcast and celebrity.

Steve knew he'd made the right choice.

The look the innocent boy gave him almost made Steve regret what he had done.

"I'll never do it again!" the boy cried, tears streaming down his face.

Steve lowered his bloodied fists, careful not to look at them.

"You better not. You know what happens if you do."

"I do!" he squealed. "I really do!"

The onlookers chuckled.

The onlookers left.

The boy struggled for breath, struggled to stand up.

Steve looked him right in the eyes. "I'm sorry."

The boy nodded, failing to understand but accepting it all the same.

Steve left.

8

It was one of those moments where you just can't hold back.

Steve Harrington was sobbing. He hadn't since he was four and had learned his family was moving from House Number One to House Number Two. Back then, it'd been the worst thing to ever happen to him, period.

Nothing really happened to cause the sobbing on this particular day. It was more of an equation. It was everything piled up and multiplied. And it hit him so fast.

Ever since renting that stupid movie, something had changed inside him. It was unclear exactly what it was, but now Steve realized every mistake he'd ever made; and, as it turned out, he'd made quite a few.

He wanted to blame it on his parents and his fortune, on the upbringing that gave him such a false sense of sovereignty or on the way ignorance lead him to cheat his way to the top of the food chain.

But, regardless of his motives, it was still his fault, *wasn't it?*

He fought back a scream.

It didn't work.

Steve Harrington screamed.

On his journey to return the movie that made him rethink his life, Steve decided to order himself and Zoe some takeout from *Yum Yum To Go*, which proved a good decision when she repeatedly thanked him for such a random act of kindness.

"You're so very different from your father," she said, working hard to keep the rice from falling out of her mouth.

"That's a relief," Steve joked, not really joking.

"No, I'm being serious. You've got a bright future ahead of you."

Even more of a relief, he thought.

"Although I suppose Jason did as well. And look where that got him."

Her point fell flat when she realized she was sitting in one of his five mansions.

"Oh. Well, um..."

"No," Steve said, taking a drink of his water. "You're right. This is horrible."

Zoe gave him a different look now, as if she truly believed the words she had said moments earlier, as if she also noticed a change within

him.

"Can I ask you something?"

"No promises on an answer but go ahead."

She waited a moment - waited for the air to stop its silence.

"If you could, would you trade your parents for money?"

Steve thought hard. He didn't know what answer she was looking for.

"It makes no difference. Either way, I'm losing nothing meaningful."

The silence managed to grow quieter. Zoe fished in her mind for a response but never found one. She decided to ignore it altogether, fighting back tears as she took the remnants of her dinner (she'd lost her appetite) to the trash can.

"Thank you for dinner."

She left the room on the verge of tears.

Steve sat alone now, watching as the Harrington mansion grew bigger and bigger, emptier and emptier, pushing him into an infinite void of nothingness.

Steve Harrington sobbed.

9

Nancy hadn't gotten out of bed with the incentive of apologizing to Steve Harrington for the harsh ending of their last encounter, but when she first laid eyes on his baby-face the next day at lunchtime, she couldn't help but wave him over to the seat across from her.

"Is this just a thing now?" he asked, his voice missing something it had before.

Confidence, Nancy decided.

"What? The lunchtime conversations?"

"Yeah, I mean..."

"It doesn't have to be."

Steve nodded, his eyes for once not glued to Nancy's face.

"Steve, listen..."

Nancy found it hard to go any further without his attention but proceeded nonetheless.

"About what happened the other night."

"Nothing happened, Nancy."

"Just listen to me, okay?"

Steve was once again transfixed in her. Nobody had ever cared enough to ask for his attention, much less the girl who seemed to hate his guts.

"Okay. I'm listening."

"I wanted to apologize. For being a jerk."

Now Steve laughed. "That role's taken."

"What do you mean?"

Steve bit his lip, shaking his head.

"I should be the one apologizing."

"For asking me out on a date?"

He was still shaking his head. "It's not that."

Nancy's eyes alone dared him to go further.

Steve took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry to everyone. I've hurt a lot of people. Made a lot of mistakes. I wanna change it but I can't. It'll cost me everything."

Steve realized that he hadn't ever shared something like this with anyone. It had just slipped out. He'd been thinking about it for the past forty eight hours but nobody had been there to listen. Sure, it wasn't the whole picture, but it was enough for Nancy to maybe start caring. He hoped it was. He prayed it was.

She didn't seem to understand, at least not fully.

"You've never hurt me, Steve."

He shrugged. Nancy noticed he was fighting back tears and reached for a napkin but Steve motioned for her not to.

"Stop, you'll make a scene," he said, covering his face beneath his hands.

Nancy bit her lip.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked, already suspecting the answer.

He sniffled and looked her right in the eyes.

"You listened to me. That's enough."

Without another word, he stood up, walking towards his usual table.

Nancy couldn't help but hate herself for not begging him to stay but he seemed to be more than content with what she'd already done. Regardless, it hurt her to see him like this.

He was King Steve. He was supposed to be strong. Flawless.

You'd think such a show of emotion would cause a girl to lose interest in him.

But those tears alone made Nancy Wheeler, for once, feel the same feelings he did for her. She liked him. A lot. And she knew she'd have to do something about it if things were to keep from getting any worse.

She decided then and there that she'd have to suck it up and attend

the stupid party.

She decided then and there that the old Nancy was gone and racing to Steve's rescue.

"What the heck?" she said aloud, cursing herself for the thoughts.

"What?" asked Barbara Holland, looking up from her Science textbook.

Nancy laughed.

"Nothing. Just thinking."

Just thinking. They're just thoughts.

She gave a confident nod and continued on with her day.

"How you gonna do it? Sleeping pills?"

Steve laughed at the thought.

"No, I'm not that evil."

Tommy arched a brow. "Well, you gotta get rid of her somehow."

Steve nodded, trying to accept it. "I guess you're right."

"I am."

"He is," Carol added.

Steve didn't particularly like the idea of either drugging or lying to Zoe, but at this point it seemed to be his only option.

"I mean...I've got how long?" Steve inquired, remembering that it'd been a few days since he last checked the calendar.

"Roughly twenty six hours," Carol said, taking pleasure in Steve's reaction.

"What the heck?!"

Steve was suddenly standing up with no memory of doing so.

"It's Monday, genius," Tommy laughed.

Steve let his face fall into his palm as anxiety hit him like a truck.

"You mean to tell me you haven't planned anything?" Tommy asked.

Steve shook his head.

"Nothing at all?"

"I've been busy! It's...been an interesting couple of..."

Steve only felt worse about his current state of mind when he realized he had absolutely no recollection of the past week.

"How many days has it been since I announced the party?"

"Three, Steve. You announced it on Friday."

He was shaking his head now, briefly considering counselling.

"I guess I just kinda zoned out for a few days."

Carol laughed. "You've always been zoned out."

Her eyes fell to Nancy. "You know, maybe it's the girl who's waking you up."

It took Steve a moment to put the pieces together and realize that Carol was, in fact, talking about Nancy in a non-derogatory voice. For the first time in days, he actually smiled, letting his eyes fall back to her.

"Maybe it is," he muttered, helplessly fantasizing about whatever his future held.

"So, anyway, the party," Tommy said, giving him a light pat on the shoulder.

And just like that, things were back to how they had been.

"Right," Steve said, rubbing his hands together. "Any ideas around the committee?"

Carol and Tommy both gave him a look of honest confusion.

He sighed. "Any ideas?"

Their faces lit up as if the entirety of the universe finally made sense.

"Oh!" they said in unison.

After a moment, they conclude, "Nope, none at all."

"Oh come on! You guys practically live for parties. Give me suggestions."

"Beer," seemed to be the best Tommy could offer.

Carol just shrugged.

"Well, thanks. I'll be sure to give you credit when everyone shows up to my house and realizes I have absolutely nothing planned."

Tommy made a noise that was usually reserved for six year old girls who didn't get the doll they desired. "What do you expect, doofus? It's not our responsibility."

"Oh please," Steve moaned. "You're the only reason I'm having this stupid party in the first place."

They'd never looked so betrayed.

"What do you mean, Harrington?" Carol asked slowly and quietly.

Steve waved his hand in the air at nothing in particular. "Whatever. Don't worry about it."

"Tell us."

Tommy was gritting his teeth, about to climb up on to the table and force an answer out of him. Steve reckoned it was best to lie right about now.

"You came up with the idea."

Tommy slowly settled back into his seat and let his muscles untense.

"That's all I meant."

They waited a moment as if a better answer was going to suddenly slip out of him but it never came. And so, like it always did, everything went back to normal.

10

The young boy couldn't believe his luck as the onlookers whispered.

"He's never missed."

"Two weeks straight and suddenly he's a no-show!"

The boy's smile only grew as the seconds ticked by, confirming he wasn't dreaming.

The onlookers continued their gossip, disappointed in the lack of show.

"Where *is Harrington*?"

The boy ran away, leaving the onlookers to moan and complain even more.

"You came back!"

"Of course I did."

Steve grinned as he entered *VHS Express*, sliding *The Empire Strikes Back* across the counter. Bob accepted it graciously, handing him a dollar in exchange.

"As promised," he smiled. "Will that be all?"

"Actually..."

Steve held out the last syllable in a pause for effect.

"I was wondering if you had any copies of whatever the crap the next one's called."

Bob chuckled. "Sure do."

He handed Steve a VHS titled *Return of the Jedi* and continued his memorized spiel.

"So I take it you enjoyed *Empire*?"

"Well, uh," Steve chuckled. "That's one way to put it."

Bob nodded, still buried in miles of laughter. "I mean, how could you not have?"

"Right," Steve added matter of factly, acting as if he'd even paid mind to the movie after the catalyst it had inflicted on to his life.

"Alright, well, you're all set. Have a good one."

"You too."

Steve winked to him for reasons he didn't know and skipped his way out of the place, glancing to his watch and sighing.

He didn't have much time.

"Surprise!"

Zoe almost jumped out of her seat, coffee leaping out of the mug she cradled.

"Oh my, Steven!"

Her eyes fell to the VHS he swiftly handed her. She smiled.

"What's this?" she asked, obviously knowing but asking nonetheless.

"Well, I figured we'd try and take our minds off of everything that went down last night."

Zoe acted as if she forgot all about it - as if she hadn't cried herself to sleep the night before. She just gave him a smile and patted him on

the back.

"It's a really sweet gesture."

"I am aware," he smirked, taking a seat beside her.

"But," she continued, causing Steve to give her a quizzical look when she did so, "I really must be getting to bed. I barely got any sleep last night and it's getting late. And I simply cannot fall asleep during a movie. It's physically impossible."

Steve bit his lip. If this didn't work, his plan would fall through.

"It's due back tomorrow morning," he lied. "I...got a deal."

She searched her mind for a response before finally caving.

"Well, alright. Let's get this show on the road. Last thing I need is to sleep the day away tomorrow."

Tuesday....

"Hey!"

Steve searched the hallway for the source of the call but couldn't find it.

"Steve!"

Immediately, he knew who to look for.

"Nancy! What is it?"

She rushed over to him, giving him a hug in a moment that Steve wished would have lasted longer. When she came out of it she acted as if it wasn't totally out of character.

"I have some news."

"Good or bad?"

"Good."

She laughed and looked to her feet. "Or, at least, I'd hope so."

Now it was Steve's turn to laugh nervously. "What do you mean?"

"I have managed to convince myself..."

She paused and Steve found it almost too adorable to handle.

"...to come to your stupid party."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "You serious?!"

"Well, I mean, Tom Cruise's party," she said, her tone much darker.

"Right," Steve joked.

"But, no, Nancy, that's great."

"Yes, I know. You're welcome."

"Thank you."

Nancy giggled. "I *think* we did that in the wrong order."

"Oh," Steve was laughing so hard that it almost made the butterflies in his stomach go away. "Well, um, thank you."

"You're welcome."

"There we go."

Their laughter died down and somehow managed to morph into the ever so loved silence that had become a constant theme between the two.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tonight then," Nancy managed, reaching in for another hug.

"Yeah, I guess so."

He hugged her back and made a (slightly) obvious attempt at making it last longer this time before letting go. He watched her walk away until she disappeared from eyesight.

"Now the party's worth it," he whispered to himself, still smiling like an idiot.

Steve came home to the inevitable sight of an asleep Zoe Harrington. He tried to shut the door without waking her but his tactic didn't work.

"Oh dear!" she cried, standing up with a blanket still wrapped around her. "I haven't been asleep all day, have I?"

Steve chuckled. "I'm afraid so."

Zoe sighed. "And somehow I'm still tired."

Steve set his backpack down, rushing to her aid and assisting her towards the massive spiral staircase at the entrance of the house.

"Well, sleeping on a couch isn't really the best for your body."

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, trying with all of her might to keep from yawning.

"Your bed."

Zoe tripped over a stair and Steve caught her. He picked her up and carried her up the rest of the way. Without incentive, she almost fell asleep in his arms.

"Oh, I shouldn't sleep any more of the day away."

"You deserve it."

He set her down in one of the twelve guest beds in the house and she exhaled, pulling the velvet covers over her frail body. While Steve closed the curtains and shut out the remaining light, she fought back tears.

"I know you tried to get my mind off it," she whispered, "But we really must talk about the other night."

Steve sat on the bed with her, shaking his head. "There's no reason."

"I know you're trying to distract me - or maybe even yourself - with meaningless movies and kind gestures...but we need to face it, Steve."

She sniffled. It scared him to see her this way.

"I'm nervous for you," she said, her voice cracking.

"Wh - why? You don't have to be nervous. I'm fine."

She couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Steve found it hard to now, also.

"I just...I'm cursing myself for not being there for you. Or, at the very least, forcing your pathetic excuses for parents to do so."

A tear rolled down Steve's cheek.

"There's nothing you could've done. It's not your fault."

She nodded, not believing a word.

"I want you to promise me something."

"Anything."

"Don't be like your father. Be stronger than that. Be human."

Steve was crying now, holding on to her small hand with strength he didn't know he had. He nodded.

"I promise. I *promise*."

They shared the silence for a few moments, revelling in it.

And, for once, Steve *knew* with all of his heart that he was wanted. Not because of his riches but, rather, in spite of them.

His mind jumped to Nancy. And then to his kingdom. And then...

The party. The stupid party.

He swallowed his spit, sending his emotions with it.

"Would you like a drink?" he offered.

She didn't seem to comprehend.

"In case you wake up."

She nodded, kissing him on the forehead. "I'd love one."

Zoe's face kept forcing itself into Steve's brain.

Just do it, Steve. They're counting on you.

He hated himself for it but gave in nonetheless.

Steve dropped the sleep inducing pills into the water and watched them dissolve, each tiny particle presenting itself as an expectant member of his kingdom.

You're making the right decision, he told himself. *Don't doubt that.*

And so he didn't.

12 - The Party

The time had finally come.

As teenager after teenager flooded into the Harrington mansion that could no doubt accommodate eight times as many, Steve felt his heart both sink and rise. It was the happiest and most scared he'd been in a long long time.

"Hello. Hi. Hey! Hello there. How ya doin? Welcome. Hi."

Every so often he'd stumble upon someone he didn't know, and it was moments like these that truly scared him. After all, he hadn't gone to the extent of considering just how many people *everybody* consisted of.

Tommy and Carol had been the first arrivals, followed shortly by Nancy. The four had shared small talk (which eventually became almost too unbearable for Steve) until the rest of the crowd had arrived. Now the house was overflowing with adolescents and the

strong odor that came part of the package deal and Steve, for the upteenth time, started to regret it all.

Once it seemed everyone had arrived, he latched the door behind him and made a quick sprint over to Nancy, grabbing himself a Coke and settling in beside her.

"Enjoying yourself?" he dared to ask.

She shrugged. "Hardly."

Steve had found it extra hard to look away from her tonight. She'd dressed up surprisingly well, showing 80% more skin than usual and looking 90% less the book nerd. Steve didn't know if he liked it or not.

"Well," he sighed, looking elsewhere. "If you have any complaints or constructive criticism, Tom Cruise is all ears."

She giggled.

"I mean, it's my first party so I'm not sure how to judge it."

"I'd reckon it's the best you'd get around here."

"What do you mean?"

Steve shrugged, sticking his bottom lip out. "You know, investment wise. I spent nearly a thousand bucks from college funds on all this."

He waved his hand around the room, noticing how little he'd actually done.

"Impressive," she joked, arching a brow at him.

He gave a nervous laugh. "Hey, it costs a lot to feed an entire population of teenagers."

Nancy nodded, standing from her seat. "Fair."

"Where are you going?" Steve asked, tossing his empty soda can in a nearby trash bag. He followed her, his hand barely touching her

exposed shoulder.

"I thought maybe Tom Cruise would have this dance."

Steve was dumbfounded.

He hadn't even noticed the music that was playing through his family's stereo system, but he forgot about it almost as quickly as he noticed it, Nancy becoming the only thing in sight.

"I...I mean, yeah. Of course."

She laughed as she dragged him to the living room where other couples (notably Tommy and Carol) were congregated. In this moment, it felt less of Steve's party and more of Nancy's but Steve could care less; that meant, if he was caught, he wouldn't have to receive the blame.

But all the anxiety had washed away at this point, and the noise of Toto's *Africa* became more inexistant as the second went by.

"You ever danced before?" she asked, her hands finding his waist.

"In my living room?" Steve laughed. "No."

"Well then, we'll learn together."

They danced without speaking for a while (Steve figured and hoped that was how it was supposed to work) before the pressure of the eyes on them finally hit. He started to let go but she pulled him back in.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, hoping he hadn't offended her.

"It's fine. I understand. A king's got the right to roam his own party."

She held him for a moment but then let go. They smiled at each other and Steve, confident that he'd made the right decision, left the room to go elsewhere.

As he exited on to the back porch, Steve almost screamed at what was occuring in the his pool.

"Hey! Pool's off limits."

The few boys and girls exited the water, scoffing at him.

He hadn't even mentioned the pool, but of course they'd managed to find it and then continued to make themselves at home. They seemed to have done that with everything.

Steve made the decision then and there that he'd never again hold such a large party without his parents' permission. It was far too much responsibility, even for a king like him.

He found Tommy and Carol making out on the kitchen counter.

"Get a room," he joked, nudging Tommy, who breathlessly let go of Carol, his glare fading when he saw the culprit.

"Harrington! Funny seeing you here."

Steve laughed. "At my party? At my house? Yeah, small world."

Tommy nodded, grabbing Carol by the face and continuing his endeavors.

"No, no...Tommy, I wasn't really kidding."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Come on, man."

Steve shook his head. "Uh uh. My mom makes dinner on that."

He laughed and walked away from the two, not doubting the fact that they'd most certainly ignore his orders.

Steve figured if he looked any longer, he'd just find more things he didn't want to find (with his luck, even *worse* things). He decided to track down Nancy and keep his attention where it belonged but such a thing proved difficult when he was cornered by a jock he didn't recognize.

"Where were you today, Harrington?"

Steve smiled, acting as if he recognized him. "Where was I supposed

to be?"

"The alleyway. With Johnson. He didn't get his daily beating."

The monstrosity of a boy slammed his fists together, implying some sort of violence.

Steve smirked. He'd already dreamed up an excuse for this one.

"I had to get ready for the party. Had to skip today."

The jock didn't seem to like that answer.

"No," he breathed. "There's more. I sense it."

"Alrighty, Master Jedi," Steve joked, shoving him aside. "King Steve's got better matters to attend to."

The jock scoffed. "So I expect you not to skip tomorrow."

Steve shrugged. "Don't you think the kid's learned his lesson by now?"

There was a pause.

"We're *counting on you*," the boy said.

Steve swallowed his spit. "I'm just saying, you know, maybe he doesn't deserve it."

He tried to walk away but the boy's massive fist caught him in the act. The jock cleared his throat for reasons Steve wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"Hey, everyone! Our king's goin' soft!"

Everything once so loud somehow became silent.

"You know why he skipped today?" he shouted, holding Steve's nimble body up for everyone to see. "Why don't you tell 'em yourself, Harrington?"

"The party," Steve muttered. "I needed to get the party ready."

The noise of the party gradually resumed and everyone seemed to shake it off as the jock's meager attempt at stealing Steve's place as king.

It hadn't worked.

Steve gave him a sly smile and waited for the inevitable response.

"You little coward."

Steve shrugged.

"Some kings have to make the decisions that others aren't brave enough to."

And with those words being said, he left the room.

Nancy perked up a little when she saw Steve re-enter the living room.

"How'd it go?" she asked, watching him take the seat beside her.

"I wish I had never left you," he admitted, a look of regret plastered to his face.

Nancy gave him a weak smile. "What happened?"

"Half naked people in my pool...make-out session on my kitchen counter...cry baby jock questioning my lack of jerkism today...I dunno, you name it."

Nancy laughed. "What was that last one?"

"Oh," Steve said, only now realizing what he'd just admitted to. "Nothing."

"Is 'jerkism' even a word?" she prodded.

"I...I don't know. It's really nothing, Nancy."

She bit her lip. "Well, I'm here to listen if you need it."

He went silent for a moment.

"Steve? Steve, did you hear me?"

When he turned his face back to her, tears were streaming down his face. He grabbed on to Nancy's wrist and pulled her out of the living room and into a small bathroom, locking the door behind him, letting all of his emotions out.

"Steve? What are you doing?!"

He couldn't speak through all the tears.

They were close now, closer than they'd ever been. Nancy could feel his scattered breathing on her chest. She reached for his face and straightened it to face her, locking eyes with him and wiping a tear from his cheek.

"I'm sorry," he managed.

"No, Steve," Nancy laughed. "Don't apologize."

"I want to tell you, I really do..."

She gave him a quizzical look. Up until this point, she hadn't really treated it as a big deal, but, from the look of it, it was very hard to confess.

"It's hard to say."

"I'm sure it is," Nancy whispered. "You don't have to tell me."

Steve shook his head, his eyes closed.

"I shouldn't be called King."

Nancy pulled him in closer to herself, wrapping her arms around him. "Nonsense."

"No," he cried, shoving her off. He wiped the tears from his eyes. "Don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"Treat me like I'm not. Like everyone else does."

Nancy arched a brow. "Steve..."

"I don't deserve all this!" he waved his arms around the small room, his voice cracking. "I don't deserve the fame when I do the things I do!"

"If you don't like the things you've done, stop doing them."

"It's not that simple, Nancy."

His breathing was heavy.

"I beat up a kid."

"You what?"

"Every day for the past few weeks, I *beat up a kid*."

Steve moaned like a baby, this time wrapping his own arms around Nancy and holding on with all of his might, hoping that it'd make him and his mistakes disappear.

Nancy just accepted the hug, nodding like she didn't hold a grudge on him for it.

"I don't want to be like that," Steve mumbled.

"You don't have to be."

Steve shook his head. "If I don't do these things...they'll hate me. I'll be replaced. Nobody at home..."

A rock formed in Steve's throat but he tried to carry on.

"At school, every decision I make matters. And I want to please everyone. I want to be adored. And if I start...I dunno, doing my homework on time or refusing to nearly kill a kid...they'll leave me behind for the next big jerk."

He let himself let go of her now, reaching for toilet paper to clean his face with, but she pulled him back in.

"I won't," she whispered, holding him tighter.

After long moments of silence, Steve started to notice the noise of music outside of the bathroom getting louder and louder. He kissed Nancy's forehead and reached for the door handle.

"Thank you," he whispered, holding her hand. "I needed this."

She nodded. "I think I did too."

When Steve opened the door, he found the culprit right in front of him.

"Having fun?" Tommy chuckled, the remote control to the mansion's stereo system in his hand. He kept tapping the button to turn the volume louder and louder.

"Tommy, you need to stop!" Steve shouted, reaching for the pulled it away, shaking his head.

"I don't think so. The party's only getting started."

Louder.

And louder.

"Tommy, please."

Nancy spoke up now. "Give him the remote!"

"Let's have the people vote!" Tommy squealed.

He shouted for everyone to hear.

"LOUDER?!"

"LOUDER!" they replied.

Tommy just laughed. "The people have spoken."

"Tommy, you need to..."

Steve's voice was drained out by the increasing noise of synth disco.

Louder.

Louder.

Louder...

Zoe Harrington opened her eyes.

She'd been awoken by... *music*?

Red and yellow strobe lights pierced through the bottom of the door.

In a fleeting moment, she was standing up, huffing and puffing as she rushed to find answers. She opened the door and screamed when she saw what was on the other side.

"STEVEN HARRINGTON!"

The music halted.

And the party ended just as quickly as it had begun.

"You promised me," Zoe said, turning off the vacuum and stopping her cleaning for the first time all night. Steve guiltily looked up from his own cleaning. "You promised to be better than that."

"I know," Steve croaked. "I'm sorry."

He really was. He'd hated the party as much as she had and was almost relieved when she'd discovered it hours earlier. The only downside was his abrupt farewell to Nancy Wheeler.

"I'm sure you're very sorry."

Steve nodded, only one question biting away at him.

"You won't tell my parents, will you?"

Zoe thought about it for a moment, eventually settling on a weak shrug.

"There's more to it than that, Steve."

"I know there is. And I promise to never make a stupid mistake like this again."

Zoe shook her head. "Oh I'm sure you won't."

"I promise," Steve cried, nearly on his knees before her.

Zoe arched a brow. "What are you fighting for? I haven't taken anything away. I haven't threatened to. You have practically nothing to lose."

She was thinking out loud.

Steve swallowed his spit, wiping his cheek and realizing there were no tears to dry. Yet.

"I let you down," he mustered.

Zoe chuckled. "I expected as much."

"I'm just like my stupid dad."

He looked up at her, watching as she stood silent.

"No," she finally said, leaning in towards him and putting her hand on his shoulder. "Don't ever let anyone tell you that. Don't tell yourself that."

"What makes me different? I make the same mistakes time and time again."

Zoe looked him right in the eyes and pulled him close.

"What makes you different, Steve, is that you realize your mistakes. And that means that one of these days, you're going to learn."

For the first time in what felt like forever, Steve smiled.

Epilogue

"Wheeler. Late again."

Nancy gave a weak smile. "Sorry, Ms. Wiet. It won't happen again."

The teacher nodded, wrote Nancy's name down, and continued with her lecture as Nancy took her seat. Barbara Holland tapped her on

the shoulder.

"Where on earth were you?"

Nancy batted her eyes, "Where do you think?"

As if on cue, Steve Harrington entered the classroom.

"Harrington!" Ms. Wiet yodelled, motioning him to take a seat.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Wiet, it won't -"

"Oh, spare the chit chat."

Steve almost laughed as he took a seat right behind Nancy.

"You said you'd wait a minute and make it less obvious," Nancy said through gritted teeth. Steve smirked.

"I didn't want to be any later than I had to be."

Nancy rolled her eyes.

"You're an idiot, Steve Harrington."

The End